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## From opera to drama

*Aspects of Wagner's composition technique in the Ring*

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*Published in:*  
Den jyske opera Ringen

*Publication date:*  
1996

*Document Version*  
Early version, also known as pre-print

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Bonde, L. O. (1996). From opera to drama: Aspects of Wagner's composition technique in the Ring. In *Den jyske opera Ringen* (pp. 61-71).

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DEN JYSKE OPERA

# Ringen



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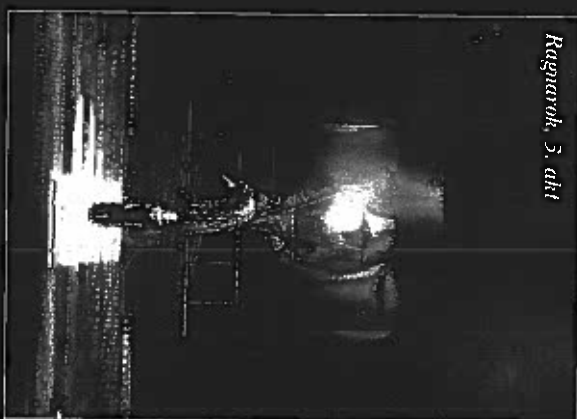
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ISBN 87-986260-0-0

The ring is also returned to the Rhinemaidens in *Götterdämmerung*, the revised version of *Siegfried's Tod*, but this does not lead to the re-establishment of Wotan's compromised dominion. Siegfried's funeral pyre is a world conflagration, which is also the end of the gods. Wagner had finished *Götterdämmerung* before he read Schopenhauer, but thereafter he made Brünnhilde, who is the great drama's true 'free hero' (inel), declaim its moral in the spirit of Schopenhauer:

Trauernder Liebe  
tiefstes Leiden  
schloss die Augen mir auf:  
enden sah ich die Welt.

Sorrowful love's  
profoundest suff'ring  
rudely opened my eyes:  
perish I saw the world

When it came to the point, however, Wagner did not set these words to music, because the music already expressed their message 'with supreme certainty'. He let the whole work end with the 'Redemption-motif', which has only been heard once before – at the end of Act 3, Scene 1 of *Die Walküre*, when Sieglinde pours out her gratitude to Brünnhilde, who has inflicted suffering upon herself for the sake of Sieglinde and her child. The great contrast is not after all between gods and Nibelungs or between human nature and political juridical formalism but between self-sacrifice and the exploitation of others. And since the ring is the means to the latter, it may be regarded as the symbol of evil will itself, to which a curse is attached.

In Wagner's first conception the ring symbolized the capitalist's private appropriation of the wealth of nature. There is and remains a state of tension between the work's social revolutionary and metaphysical Schopenhauerian aspects. But these are nevertheless united in its final message: that a world based on evil power – on the exploitation of others – is doomed. This message has not lost its current interest, and is for that matter revolutionary enough.

*English translation: Paula Hestrup-Jessen*

## From Opera to Drama

### Aspects of Wagner's Composition Technique in the Ring

by Lars Ole Bonde

A well known anecdote tells about the strange behaviour of the composer (and Wagner admirer) Anton Bruckner when attending a Wagner performance in the Vienna State Opera. He would draw the curtain of the box, thus being able to concentrate on what he considered essential: the musical narrative. This may seem very odd and not at all in agreement with Wagner's idea of the drama as the ultimate purpose of the performance as an aesthetic unity of text, music, visual art and gesture. On the other hand: Bruckner knew, that the real protagonist of the Wagnerian drama was – the orchestra. Maybe Bruckner did not – unlike the rest of us – need any visual help to grasp the essence of 'the Artwork' of the Future?

In an almost paradoxical way Bruckner's attitude is congruent with the theories of the first visionary Wagner director and designer, the Swiss Adolphe Appia (1862-1928). The common denominator is the concept of music as the primary force in the musical drama – a core concept in the thinking of Arthur Schopenhauer, although not explicitly of Wagner himself.

He spoke of the musical drama as "Deeds of music made visible" ("Sichtlich gewordene Taten der Musik") – and this is the challenge of all Wagner directors and designers. But first they have to decide what "Deeds" (Taten) actually means. My suggestion for a translation of the metaphor is "Energies of music made visible". This is in harmony with Wagner's understanding of the (music) drama as a process of psychological experience and transformation. This process may be purely auditive (as in Bruckner's case), but most of us would never dispense with an external visualization: the directors' and designers' interpretation of the *Ring*.

This article is not the place for a review of the fascinating history of *Ring* productions and designs from 1869 to the present day. The development from naive romantic naturalism to psychodynamic symbolism and postmodern mix of styles can be studied in several books (Osborne 1982, Millington & Spencer 1992). But the idea of "Deeds of music" or "Energies of music" can be the starting point for a closer investigation of Wagner's view of music as a dramatic component. A theme

thoroughly discussed in the theoretical study *Opera and Drama* (1851) – and of course transformed into practice with the *Ring* tetralogy.

#### Showdown with opera – and visions of drama

Wagner agreed with Schopenhauer in the idea of music expressing 'the inner essence' of a phenomenon. Of course he also knew that music can imitate phenomena in the outer world. He wanted to create music capable of both symbolization and illustration in the service of the drama. A musical narrative – describing the greatest and wordily inexpressible aspects of life. In order to make the narrative understandable for ordinary people (Wagner was not an exclusive artist, only referring to an audience of 'Connoisseurs' (German: Kenner)) music should cooperate with poetry, artwork, choreography etc. Thus the integrated work of art (the "Gesamtkunstwerk") was Wagner's answer to the question: How can a drama in the spirit of Greek Tragedy be reborn in the 19th century? (For some years this was a joint project for Wagner and Nietzsche, who – acknowledging the inspiration of his older friend – called his first dissertation of 1872 *The Birth of Tragedy by the Spirit of Music*).

Within the existing traditions of European opera and music theatre Wagner found no basis for 'making visible the energies of music'. The concept of (musical) energy implies a polarized source: plus and minus, male and female. For Wagner the theorist music represented a feminine principle, poetry (verbal drama) a masculine. The vision of the (Music) Drama is androgynous, and the Canadian musicologist Jean-Jacques Nattiez has devoted a whole book to the exploration of androgyny in the "Ring" and in Wagner's drama theory (Nattiez 1993).

In "Opera and Drama" the composer writes his own version of the history of opera, based on the famous axiom that a medium of expression, music, had become a purpose in itself; and that the drama (the narrative) had been reduced to a medium in the production of musical pleasure for a large audience. "Femininity had conquered masculinity". Analyzing Italian, French and German opera in the 19th century (represented by Rossini, Meyerbeer and Weber), he concludes that opera must be liberated from the entertainment industry and transformed into a true art form. Opera should become an 'ideal art form' like the symphony since Beethoven. Not just music 'for pleasure', but art for self reflection, inner exploration and contemplation. According to Wagner this could only be achieved if all opera traditions were abandoned, once and for all. Already in the short story "A Pilgrimage to Beethoven" (1840) Wagner had anticipated his later theory, letting his great idol say:

"I don't know any theatre for whom I would write an opera! If I wrote an opera in my own way people would run away; for there would be no arias, no duets, trios and all the fills, that nowadays are mixed into opera. No singers would sing it, no audience would listen. They know only the successful lie, the brilliant nonsense and the perfumed boredom."

#### The new path

Wagner's music drama ("Szenenfestspiel") can only be understood as an extreme contrast to the established opera – in almost every respect.

As for the libretto and text material, historical subjects were dismissed – in favour of myths. But Wagner also abolishes traditional verse, rhymes and blank verse. In the *Ring* we experience a new type of declamation: Wagner introduces (his personal adaptation of) old Norse alliteration ("Stabreim"). The result is "musical prose": the (verse) melody follows the text intimately with one note per syllable; and therefore the melodic structure is no longer symmetrical or regular. What was labelled "infinite melody" is in fact a musical flow, where traditional operatic "division of labour" between recitative/scena and aria/ensemble (dialogue/action as opposed to melody/emotion) is dissolved.

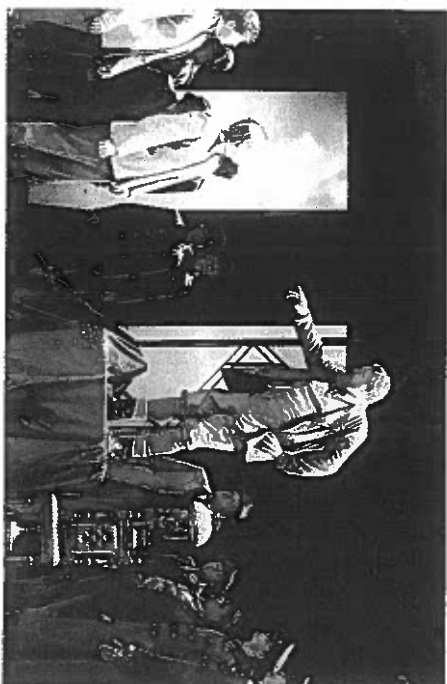
But the most essential innovation is in fact not this new way of designing the vocal parts. The real revolution is the *orchestral melody*. With Beethoven as his model and ideal, Wagner wanted to design the musical flow as a process of inner coherence, motivic development and transformation, and interpretation and expansion of the visual and verbal expression, always obeying the rules of the drama. Later Wagner could refer to Schopenhauer's concept of 'music as the essence of the world': music (the orchestral melody) begins, where verbal language ends, as a meaningful "sounding silence".

The result was "Symphonic Opera". But how can opera be symphonic?

#### Opera as Symphony. Myth or reality?

Wagner's admiration of Beethoven is well known. As is his interpretation of Beethoven's 9th Symphony as a new quality level in the history of music: the introduction of voices in the symphonic universe showed – according to Wagner – that the symphony had come to its limits. And on the other hand that music drama would be its natural successor – adapting the symphonic technique for its dramatic purpose. The con-

cept of "Symphonic Opera" goes back to Wagner's theoretical writings of the 1860s and 70s. In the article *Opera as Symphony*, a Wagnerian Myth Carolyn Abbate (1989) gives a critical discussion of the 'mainstream' interpretation of 'Wagner's symphonic technique' and the parallels between Wagner and Beethoven. She regards them as an expression of historical 'wishful thinking': "Later generations have found them convenient and comfortable: convenient because they provide a neat strand of music-historical continuity through a century of musical dislocations, and comfortable because they place a mantle of absolute-musical respectability – Beethovens mantle – on Wagner's doubtful theatrical shoulders." (p.93) She traces this attitude back to Alfred Lorenz, whose purely musical analysis of Wagner's dramas founded an analytic tradition searching for Bar-forms, sonata principles, rondos etc. in Wagner's works. But it is not on the structural, architectonic level Wagner resembles great symphonists like Beethoven and Brahms. And he does not always compose 'symphonic', as Abbate demonstrates it in her analysis of the "Revenge-Trio" in *Götterdämmerung* (Act II, scene 5): this is an example of the traditional dramaturgic principles of (Grand) opera. This is in harmony with George Bernard Shaw's critique of *Götterdämmerung*, which he considered a step backwards, from the principles of the drama "back to opera" (*The Perfect Wagnerite*, 1898). Maybe it is necessary to underline that the Wagner of the Ring was primarily a dramatist. He tried specifically not to place music in a position prior to text, design etc. In Abbates words: "Wagner did not believe in the essentially abstract nature of his music. As late as 1879, he was insisting with some vehemence that his music could not be understood in terms of abstract musical canons." (p. 104) 'Wagner the Symphonist' is to be found at the level of musical details, and Nietzsche was aware of this when he called Wagner a brilliant composer of miniatures. To be even more precise: The symphonic procedures are to be found within the musical process of development. Like Beethoven and Brahms (and maybe especially like Liszt) Wagner is occupied with musical motives and their transformation potentials, within the specific dramatic situation. The principle may often remind you of the principle of fairy tales: 'third time is the time of success'. It could also be called the principle of metamorphosis. Wagner likes to build an episode (shorter or longer) in three sections, of which the two first are very much alike (the second often a sequenced version of the first on a higher melodic level), while the last section is different in length and contour. This is what Lorenz calls Bar-form. The principle is A-A1-B or A-A1-A2. In Brahms' 1st Symphony the majestic theme in 1st movement is introduced this way,



Hagen

referring directly to the theme of "Joy" (Freude) in the 4th movement of Beethoven's 9th Symphony. This is all part of the baggage of 'Wagner the Symphonist'. Abbate writes that Wagner took a different standpoint regarding the status of the music in the totality in the 1860s and 1870s (like in so many other matters). The concepts found in *Opera and Drama* (1851) are not the same as in *Music of the Future* (1860) or *Beethoven* (1870), so maybe Abbate is right: The term "Symphonic" is mainly an important Wagnerian metaphor, establishing a mythical link between Beethoven and himself.

#### Pierre Boulez on 'Wagner the Modernist'

On this theme it is very interesting to read what Pierre Boulez has to say about Wagner's composition technique. As a conductor Boulez only devotes himself to music from which he can learn something as a composer. Already in his first Bayreuth season with *Parsifal* in 1970 he expressed his basic understanding of Wagner as a 'modern' composer: "It is not until Wagner that we find musical material at the same time complete and incomplete, acceptable as definitive as well as indefinite. Material at the same time belonging to the categories of past and future, with the present between them, without any breakdown of the inner musical logic.... This music material, always being in an eternal process of 'being created', may be Wagner's most astounding personal invention. For the first time in music history we find an underlining of uncertainty and indeterminacy, a rejection of the final statement and of defining musical events before their potentials of development and renewal are fully explored."

The so-called 'Leitmotives' (leading motives) are not (as you might think) defined once and for all in a certain shape. The secret of Wagner's method is, according to Boulez, to be found in his concepts of time and tempo, and this may be his most important contribution to music history: The permanent interaction or change between static, 'fluid' time and dynamic time with a fixed pulse. A Leitmotif is never limited to or by the tempo of its first presentation. The development of the temporal structure of the artwork is established through the decomposition, development and transformation of the motives. In Wagner's own words: The inner coherence of the artwork should be established by "a web of basic motives penetrating the whole artwork. As in a symphonic movement the motives will contrast and complete each other, being changed, separated and reunited during the process."

The Verse Melody ("Versmelodie") was the new name for this music of symbolization, and the task of creating musical coherence was given to the *Orchestral melody*. The central point of the performance was moved from the stage to the pit.

#### "Leitmotives" – emotional signposts in the music

The term was coined not by Wagner himself, but by Hans von Wolzogen, one of the first 'priests' of the Bayreuth 'Community'. In Wagner's own terminology these core motives, presented above all in the orchestra's "Endless Melody", were described as "plastic moments of emotion", "melodic moments of feeling" and "emotional signposts along the drama's way". The problem with the term (and with the many "Guides" ("Werktüher") to Wagner's dramas) is that they may give you the impression of the motives as static 'pieces' in the big musical puzzle; that they are always identical. You may also think that 'understanding the Ring' means being able to identify the motives at their appearances. This is a dead end, however. In the *Ring* Wagner uses over 100 different motives, with a duration from a few seconds to around 15 seconds. During the almost 15 hours of music the motives rarely appear in a certain definite form, as Boulez pointed out. For the idea is not to give the characters their individual musical 'identity cards' (Debussy's ironic statement) or to give the requisites a cloakroom ticket (Stravinski). Of course the main characters can be identified by their motives, but it may be easier to understand Wagner's idea when comparing the Leitmotives with the reminiscent motives of romantic opera (Weber, Marschner, Berlioz etc. Wagner uses this technique in e.g. *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*). A reminiscent

*motif* can be very impressive and mean a lot to the musical experience. But it seldom plays an important role in the *structure* of the musical composition. In other words: The reminiscent motif has a marked, but isolated function (like a special piece in a puzzle), whereas the Leitmotif is an 'open form' of great structural significance in the symphonic process. The motives are intimately related to one another; Wagner writes in his *Epilogic Account* of the writing of the *Ring* in 1871:

*In Das Rheingold I at once set out along the new path where the first thing I had to find was the plastic nature motives, which shaped themselves, as they developed in ever more individual ways, into the vehicles for the promptings of the passions motivating the much-ranfied action and the character who expressed themselves in it.*

These motives "let us know the deepest secrets of the poem", as Wagner writes in *Opera and Drama*. He said the same in other words: "Music cannot think, but it can realize thoughts." As a good example of Wagner's method (and also of the problem connected to the 'labelling of the Leitmotives') I will mention the motive to be heard for the first time in Scene II of *Das Rheingold*, when the giants Fasolt and Fafner return to Valhalla in order to be paid as agreed in the contract with Wotan. He has promised them the Goddess of Love, Freia, who of course tries to escape her cruel destiny.

The dramatic, up tempo string motive accompanying Freia's cry for help was labelled "Flight" by Wolzogen (who related it to other parallel situations, like in the beginning of *Die Walküre* Act II). But for a closer examination (like in the work of Deryck Cooke) the motive appears to be one of many transformations of the central Love motive in the *Ring*. It is of course related to Freia, and it has two parts. The first part (ascending) symbolizes the sensual qualities of love, while the second part (a tiny, in itself not very prominent turning figure of 4 or 5 notes) symbolizes the emotional aspects of love, including compassion.

Cooke has traced the second part of the motive all the way back to scene I of *Das Rheingold*, where Alberich mourns his rejection by the Rhinemaidens. In many, many transformations it follows the characters connected to love through the world drama. In fact Wagner's art of transformation can be studied in depth by following this motif and its way through the *Ring*.

**The omniscient composer – and the omniscient orchestra**  
In a letter to August Röckel in 1854 Wagner writes about the score of the newly finished *Das Rheingold* that “there is hardly a bar in the orchestra not developed from previously introduced motives.” Although this may be a truth with modifications it is obvious that Wagner’s technique as a story teller or narrator is parallel to what is called an “Omniscient narrator” within literature theory. As a narrator Wagner knows more than his characters, and he does not hesitate to inform us, the audience, about hidden aspects of the drama. All we have to do is to listen to the orchestra.

The technical means are:

- The musical motives in the *Ring* are ‘open forms’ or ‘matrices’ given a specific identity in the specific dramatic situation (cf. Boulez),
- The motives are grouped in symbolic ‘families’ with very different and distinctive genes.
- The development of the motives is symphonic in character: *variation* (of tempo, sound, harmony), *derivation* (one motif is derived by another), *contrast* etc. With “the art of transition” Wagner was able to let different motives pass into one another almost imperceptibly.
- This technique leads to a new principle of musical form; a hierarchical system. Motives are connected into complexes, groups of complexes to “poetico-musical periods”, periods to scenes, and scenes to acts or whole dramas.

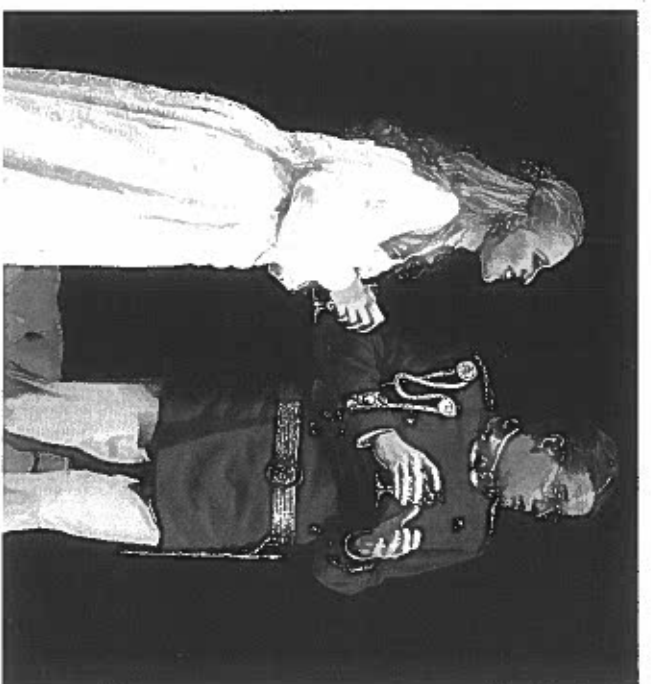
### The basic musical symbolism

It is easiest to follow the grouping of the motives in ‘families’ in *Das Rheingold*, where most of the important basic motives are introduced.

**Nature motives** (related to the symbols of The basic Nature Motive (major triad), The Rhine, The Rhinemaidens, Erda, The Gold, and later The Sword) are simple and straightforward, based (like the natural scale itself) on triads (major or minor), or pentatonic scales. In the first scene of *Das Rheingold* we hear most of them and experience the relationship between them. If for instance the Rhine motif is changed to minor and a much slower tempo it turns into the Erda motif. If Erda (rising) motif is inverted (falling) it turns into the motif of The Twilight of the Gods. And so forth....

Contrasting the Nature Motives are

**The Culture Motives.** They are divided into two groups representing the opposite forces of the *Ring*: The **Power Motives** (related to the symbols The Ring, Valhalla, The Spear, The Curse, The Tarnhelm) as opposed to the **Love Motives**



*Gutrune and Gunther*

(symbolically connected with Freia and later especially with the love relations of the Volsungs).

The motives of the Power Universe are complex and tense. They have a characteristic ambiguity unknown of the Nature motives; not major or minor, but altered triads are their main feature. The tritone interval (e.g. f<sup>♯</sup>-c<sup>♯</sup> with the old symbolic name “Diabolus in musica”) is an important common denominator. The relationship between the motives of the Ring, Valhalla and the Curse is made very clear by Wagner. Their common structure of intervals is (seen or heard from above) a major third and two minor thirds. Played as a chord it is the symbol of ambiguity itself (the “Shadow chord” of romantic harmony as a chord structure also identical with the famous *Tristan*-chord!)

The motives of the Love Universe have a quite different nature. All Freia motives are dependent on the specific situation and character. They may have a shade of chromaticism (symbolizing yearning, pain or passion), but basically they are melodically simple and earnest – open structures well suited for development and transformation, like love itself. In a very interesting study the Jungian analyst Sally Kester demonstrates, how Wagner polarizes and transforms the con-



trast of power and love on three levels: a musical, a psychological and a symbolic level, the Leitmotives being the intermediary agents between the three levels. (Kester 1988)

The Motives of Tragic Heroism are introduced in *Die Walküre* (connected to the Volsungs and later Brünnhilde). They are closer related to Nature than to Culture. The heroes and heroines of the *Ring* are in general characterized by motives combining a fanfare and a triad (major or minor). Deryck Cooke has shown, how this family of motives can be traced back to the sombre, mystical and noble motif of Erda, who knows all about the tragedies to come.

Of course not all of the more than 100 motives of the "Ring" belong to one of these three families. But the complex symbolism of Nature, Culture and Tragic Heroism is the basic musical idea. It is tempting to suggest that the basic structures, especially the contrast between the major triad of the Nature motive and the four-note "Shadow" chord of the Ring/Curse motif, are "musical archetypes", the musical poles (positive/negative) of the *Ring* universe.

In *Opera and Drama* Wagner writes that the (Leit)motif has two different functions; *suspicion* and *remembrance*. Listening to these motives "we remember the suspicion, while they make remembrance a suspicion for us". The remembrance function is the most prominent in practice, and that is why the German musicologist Carl Dahlhaus compares Wagner's Orchestral melody with the "Development section" of a symphony, but without the symphony's "Exposition" or "Recapitulation". Wagner's symphonic music is referring to the past most of the time. The principal theme of the music (and the drama) is the enormous shadow of the past darkening the scenic present, our audience experience here and now. The 'Music of the Past' is determining the 'Music of the Present', much more than the 'Music of the Future' is determining the 'Music of the Future'.

An illustrative example is Siegfried's "Funeral March", a chronological narrative of the hero's journey, his destiny and fate. Other great symphonic narratives are the prelude to Act III of *Siegfried*, "Siegfried's Rhine Journey" and of course the closing scene of *Götterdämmerung*.

The 'Shadow Effect' of the Ring and Curse motives culminates in *Götterdämmerung*. Here the central symbolic (chord) structure expands to five notes (an extra minor third is added) which penetrates the drama colouring even well-known motives in a demoniacal and even terrifying way. With purely musical means Wagner shows us, how the curse of the ring increasingly poisons the universe of the drama.

## Magic or Art?

In his critical examination of Wagner's composition technique (*Versuch über Wagner*, 1938) the German philosopher Th. W. Adorno called the composer a magician. This was not meant in a positive sense; Adorno tried to demonstrate, how the composer (anticipating the techniques of film music) in his special method of creating mixed orchestral sounds is concealing the actual procedures of sound making for the audience.

Maybe Wagner's magic can be evaluated from another perspective. Finally I will quote two aphorisms from a small, but wise book of the African author Ben Okri: *Birds of Heaven* (1996): "Magic distracts our attention from the hidden methods, arts draws our attention to the hidden revelation." (479) If you, from a sceptical Adorno-like position, want to know what's the difference between magic and art, Okri says (480): "Magic becomes art, when it has nothing to hide." Whether Wagner's music has something to hide or not is up to the listener.

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